

Prepared Statement of Mark Johnston

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Needs Assistance Programs
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Hearing before the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
Committee on Financial Services
United States House of Representatives



“Affordable Housing Needs of America’s Low Income Veterans”

December 5, 2007

Introduction

Chairwoman Waters, Ranking Member Capito, Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to represent Secretary Alphonso Jackson and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Secretary recognizes the moral responsibility America has to its veterans. This is especially true for those who have served our country who now sleep on the streets of this great nation.

The Department administers a variety of housing programs that can assist veterans. These include the Housing Choice Voucher Program, Public Housing, HOME Investment Partnerships, and the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. These programs, by statute, provide great flexibility so that communities can use their federal resources to meet their particular local needs, including the needs of their veterans. In addition to these programs, Congress has authorized a variety of targeted programs for special needs populations, including homeless persons.

Unfortunately, veterans are well represented in the homeless population. HUD is committed to serving homeless veterans and recognizes that Congress charges HUD to serve all homeless groups. HUD's homeless assistance programs serve single individuals as well as families with children. Our programs serve persons who are impaired by substance abuse, mental illness and physical disabilities as well as non-disabled persons. HUD provides an array of housing and supportive services to all homeless groups, including homeless veterans. I would like to take a moment to outline our activities that specifically relate to serving homeless veterans.

Targeted HUD Homeless Assistance

In February of 2007, HUD competitively awarded a total of nearly \$1.3 billion in targeted homeless assistance. A record 5,288 projects received awards. It is important to note that veterans are eligible for all of our homeless assistance programs and HUD emphasizes the importance of serving veterans in its grant application. A total of 205 applications were submitted in 2006 that stated that at least half of their proposed clients would be veterans. Of that number, we awarded funds to 185 projects, which represent 90 percent of the veteran-specific projects submitted. We awarded just over \$41 million to these targeted projects. In addition, we awarded almost \$301 million to 1,244 projects that will be serving at least 10% homeless veterans among the other homeless groups that they will be assisting. When you combine all projects serving veterans – targeted and non-targeted – we awarded a total of 1,429 projects for over \$342 million in 2006.

To underscore our continued commitment to serve homeless veterans, we have highlighted veterans in our annual planning and application process. Approximately \$1.3 billion is available in this year's Continuum of Care homeless grants competition. In the grant application we encourage organizations that represent homeless veterans to be at the planning table. Because of HUD's emphasis, over 90 percent of all communities nationwide have active homeless veteran representation. We also require that communities identify the number of homeless persons who are veterans so that each community can more effectively address their needs. To that end, in collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs, we also strongly encourage that

communities use the VA's CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups) data in assessing the needs of their homeless veterans when preparing their HUD grant application.

Interagency Initiatives

Many of those living on our nation's streets are veterans. The Administration's goal of ending chronic homelessness is helping to meet the needs of these veterans. Because the chronically homeless face many challenges, it is imperative to involve many partners. HUD, the VA, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor and the other agencies that make up the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) have worked to achieve this goal at the federal level. With a sustained effort since 2002, we are starting to see results. HUD just recently announced an 11.5 percent reduction in chronic homelessness nationwide between 2005 and 2006. This is the first time since the federal homelessness programs were created in 1987 that this country has seen a reduction in homelessness of any kind. We are currently reviewing the 2007 data and will be releasing it in the next several months.

I represent HUD on VA's Secretarial Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans. In fact, I just returned yesterday from an Advisory Committee meeting held in Tampa, Florida – VA's home to key programs for homeless veterans. This important advisory group has specifically addressed chronic homelessness among veterans. Additionally, there are a number of initiatives that HUD has been involved in that focus on ending chronic homelessness in this country. I'd like to highlight two of them.

- The first is a joint initiative with federal interagency partners like HUD, VA, HHS and ICH. Called the Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness, this was the first demonstration program to specifically focus on chronically homeless persons. HUD contributed \$20 million of the initial \$35 million awarded. HUD's funds provided the housing needed by this population. The VA and HHS provided the needed supportive services to help persons stabilize their lives. Hundreds of people, including veterans who formerly called the streets their home, are now living in stable housing and taking advantage of substance abuse treatment and other needed services.
- HUD and the Department of Labor awarded \$13.5 million to five grantees nationwide to provide permanent housing and employment assistance to chronically homeless persons, including veterans. The local partners provided additional needed services such as health care, education, and life skills. We believe that the combination of housing and jobs has helped chronically homeless persons change their lives and become more self-sufficient.

In addition to special interagency grant initiatives, HUD regularly works with its federal program partners to address the needs of homeless persons, including homeless veterans. For example, this past August, HUD participated in the Department of Labor's DOL-VETS Grantees Training Conference held in Denver, Colorado. HUD was able to provide information on our homeless funding process to over 300 DOL grantees who received awards to help veterans overcome employment barriers. The opportunities to focus on issues involving homeless veterans extend beyond the federal agencies. For instance, HUD works with the National Coalition for Homeless

Veterans and actively participates in their conferences. These opportunities to work with organizations at all levels are very helpful as we continue to make progress in serving homeless veterans.

To coordinate veterans' efforts within HUD, to reach out to veterans organizations, and to help individual veterans, HUD established the HUD Veterans Resource Center. The Center, headed by a veteran, has a 1-800 number to take calls from veterans and to help address their individual needs. The Center has taken over 1,300 calls this year. The Resource Center works with each veteran to connect them to resources in their own community. Finally, the Center also provides information within the Department and with other agencies and veterans organizations to better address the needs of veterans.

Technical Assistance

The Department also serves homeless veterans by providing technical assistance. In one recent effort, we dedicated approximately \$350,000 to enhance assistance to providers serving homeless veterans, update existing technical assistance materials, and coordinate with VA's homeless planning networks.

To enhance the capacity of organizations that want to specifically focus on serving homeless veterans, we developed two technical assistance guidebooks. The first guidebook, *Coordinating Resources and Developing Strategies to Address the Needs of Homeless Veterans*, describes programs serving veterans that are effectively coordinating HUD homeless funding with other resources. The second guidebook, *A Place at the Table: Homeless Veterans and Local Homeless Assistance Planning Networks*, describes the successful participation of ten veterans' organizations in their local Continuums of Care. Both of these guidebooks are available on HUD's website. Additionally, we have held national conference calls and workshops to provide training and assistance to organizations that are serving, or planning to serve, homeless veterans.

Conclusion

Again, I want to reiterate my and HUD's desire and commitment to help our veterans, including those who are homeless. We will continue to work with our federal, state and local partners to do so.

Madame Chairwoman, I will be glad to address any questions the Subcommittee may have.